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Viewing cable 05PARIS6576, AMBASSADOR'S MEETING WITH NATIONAL ASSEMBLY

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
05PARIS6576	2005-09-26 14:45	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Paris

Appears in these articles:

http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/documents-wikileaks/article/2011/02/09/wikileaks-les-visiteurs-de-l-ambassade_1477418_1446239.htm

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 PARIS 006576

SIPDIS

DEPT ALSO FOR EUR/WE, DRL/IL, INR/EUC, EUR/ERA, EUR/PPD,
AND EB
DEPT OF COMMERCE FOR ITA
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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/07/2015
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ELAB](#) [EU](#) [FR](#) [GM](#) [SOCI](#) [PINR](#) [ECON](#)
SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S MEETING WITH NATIONAL ASSEMBLY
PRESIDENT JEAN-LOUIS DEBRE -- AN UNRECONSTRUCTED GAULLIST
AND WRY OBSERVER OF THE CURRENT DOMESTIC POLITICAL SCENE

Classified By: Ambassador Craig Stapleton for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary: At a September 21 meeting with Ambassador Stapleton, President of the National Assembly and leader of the Gaullist faction in the ruling Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) party Jean-Louis Debre brushed aside assertions that U.S.-French relations are on the mend and foresaw, instead of increasing cooperation in the Middle East and Africa, growing tensions over the putative U.S. intentions -- he had in mind more U.S. corporations than the USG -- to supplant French (and European) influence. In the same vein, he insinuated that U.S. supplanting of French economic interests in Turkey was sapping French support for Turkish EU membership and described an enlarged EU as one that no one (in France) wanted. In general, Debre warned that French economic woes and loss of markets were reducing its political options.

12. (C) Turning to the recent elections in Germany, Debre suggested that the gridlocked election results were of less concern to the French than the stagnation of the German economy. He interpreted Merkel's slim victory as a rejection of "ultraliberalism" that would not be lost on the French domestic political players, while worrying that a grand coalition would produce ever more radical opposition in Germany on the extreme left and extreme right. Debre called France's upcoming 2007 presidential election "the end of a cycle" for the country, but cautioned that disarray and divisions across the board on the political scene made it difficult to foresee how the transition from one political

era to another would play out, or who would win the next elections. He explained the bitter competition to succeed President Chirac largely as an older generation of politicians' last and desperate chance -- given Chirac's long domination of the political scene -- to run for high office. End Summary.

Worried about Putative U.S. Inroads

13. (C) The Ambassador commenced the meeting by noting that U.S.-French relations appeared to be back on track following past differences over Iraq. Debre commented that he had studied carefully A/S Fried's recent interview in *Le Monde* but -- in what set the tone for the remainder of the discussion -- responded that the bilateral relationship historically had always been difficult and no doubt would be so again soon, although France had always stood by the U.S. in times of true need. It remained to be seen, he said, whether the recent terrorist attacks in the UK would also be repeated in France. He noted that terrorists were using their opposition to the Iraq war to justify their attacks, and predicted that any attack in France would make use of similar slogans, notwithstanding GOF opposition to the Iraq war.

14. (C) Broadening his sights, Debre posited a "struggle for influence" between the U.S. and Europe in the Mediterranean and Africa and complained that Africans were increasingly citing what the U.S. was doing to try to exact more concessions from France. Terming the Mediterranean region essential to French interests, he warned of growing U.S.-French tensions over Morocco and Tunisia. Under questioning by a skeptical Ambassador, Debre complained in particular that U.S. businesses were supplanting their French counterparts in these two key regions, which he said was leading also to increased competition for political influence. Debre focused on Turkey in particular, stating that France had long had a privileged situation there that was being undermined by the U.S.; this partly explained declining French support for eventual Turkish EU membership.

15. (C) Debre cautioned that "economic competition, while natural," risked leading to serious political tensions unless kept in check. Confronted with the argument that the U.S. and France needed to work together in the Middle East and Africa to address the larger challenges of promoting democratization, good governance, and prosperity, and confronting the threat of terrorism, Debre responded that these were "reasonable" arguments, but that political considerations needed to take economic concerns more into account. Otherwise, he warned, politics would yield to emotionalism and demagogery.

16. (C) The Ambassador questioned Debre's depiction of the extent and nature of U.S. influence and wondered aloud why Debre was more focused on the Mediterranean than on Europe, where its traditional interests lay. Debre disagreed, saying that France's future challenges were in the Mediterranean, given the demographics of the region (especially among the young) and Europe's declining energy. Europe was essential, he said, but its historical dynamism had ended with the fall of the Soviet Union. It had lost its *raison d'être* and changed in essence. No one (in France) wanted the enlarged Europe that had emerged in recent years; Europe had worked well only when its members were small in number. It was now too difficult to come to common understandings on foreign policy and other issues. Only France, Spain, Germany, and Italy thought alike. When the Ambassador cited his experience in the Czech Republic to argue that Europe's new members were very attached to the EU, Debre complained that they had taken advantage of others' largesse only to join the ranks of France's economic competitors.
German Elections and the "End of Ideology"

17. (C) Asked for his assessment of the inconclusive results of the German elections, Debre described the Franco-German entente in familiar terms as of critical importance and as the indispensable engine of the European project. He viewed CDU leader Merkel as someone perhaps less dedicated to the centrality of the France-Germany alliance, who favored a vision of Europe "closer to that of the British." That said, he judged that the ideological differences between left and right had, as a practical matter, disappeared in Germany and in France, citing the French government's current emphasis on reducing unemployment "socially."

18. (C) Contending that the French were much more conscious of German economic performance than political orientation (he said the French were "obsessed" with German economic performance), Debre drew the conclusion that what will ultimately carry the day in France are German economic policies that work, not whether it is a free-market or statist oriented party that implements the policies. However, Debre said that Merkel's failure to win a clear-cut

victory represented a clear rejection of "ultra-liberalism", the importance of which would not be lost on French politicians. He expressed concern that a grand coalition between the center-left and center-right in Germany could encourage the growth of radicalism on both wings.

The Domestic Political Scene

¶19. (C) Asked how French politicians were interpreting the results of the German elections, Debre explained that, "we have arrived at the end of a cycle." In Debre's view, the political era dominated by Francois Mitterrand and Jacques Chirac -- and the kind of left/right differences they stood for -- was coming to an end. Moreover, "the only important election in France is the presidential election; all the others are merely trivial commentary." This, in Debre's view, explained why so much was being invested by so many in pursuing the presidency so far ahead of time (the first round of the election is in April 2007). "Many ambitions were emerging" as a result of divisions in the political parties, a changing electorate, and what Debre called "the coming to an end" of Chirac's leading role in French politics (although he later denied that he was ruling out a third term for Chirac). In addition, France's two-round electoral system (the first round of which, in effect, is an election with two winners), was tempting even fairly marginal candidates to believe that under the right circumstances, they could be winners.

¶110. (C) Debre also noted that the successor generation was relatively old. The all-or-nothing intensity of rivalries on both the left (for example, Fabius vs. Strauss-Kahn) and the right (for example, Sarkozy vs. Villepin) were exacerbated by the fact that "it's their last shot, or second to the last at best". (Comment: This is particularly true on the center-left; almost all the heirs to Mitterrand (former prime minister Laurent Fabius, former Finance Minister Dominique Strauss-Kahn, and former Culture Minister Jacques Lang) are approaching sixty. On the center-right, Villepin and Sarkozy are both only in their early fifties. Sarkozy, however, has thirty years of experience in politics and has already served three times in key ministries and sees no reason why he should have to "wait his turn" any longer. End Comment.)

¶111. (C) Finally, Debre commented that real ideological debate was a thing of the past. Returning to his theme that policy results were more important to voters than a political credo, Debre lamented the demise of ideological clarity -- left vs. right, Socialists vs. Gaullists -- that had structured French politics during the cycle now reaching its end. He said that "things were much simpler then," adding that the disintegration of this ideological structuring of the political landscape made it very difficult to foresee how the current transition would play out over the longer term.

Comment

¶112. (C) We have reported Debre's remarks in detail not because they represent official GOF policy, but because they are typical of the persistence of a certain strain of traditional French thinking and because Debre is so close to Chirac and now PM de Villepin. That Debre would come across as an unreconstructed Gaullist, as evidenced by giant cardboard caricatures of Charles de Gaulle and Chirac standing in the corner of his office (after all, his father -- de Gaulle's first Prime Minister, also wrote the 1958 French constitution) was hardly surprising. But his unvarnished, zero-sum portrayal of U.S.-French relations was sobering, and illustrates the difficulties the U.S. often faces in overcoming reflexive French suspicions about U.S. intentions. His focus on market share as the measure of international influence and, indeed, politics in general, was also striking.

¶113. (C) Debre might have added that his observation about "many ambitions emerging" applies equally to himself and to his tireless behind-the-scenes efforts in support of Villepin's goal of displacing Sarkozy as leader of center-right and the successor to Chirac in 2007. Debre seemed buoyant and energetic -- a seasoned politician who was relishing the prospect of upcoming political battles -- specifically, the factional infighting for control of the UMP between "Gaullists and "Liberals" which is the intra-party dimension of the Villepin vs. Sarkozy rivalry.